

# Mary Shelley

(1797-1851)

Mary Shelley was born on August 30, 1797, in London, England. She was the daughter of a politically radical, literary couple who married just a few months before her birth to protect her legal status. Her father, William Godwin, was a philosopher and writer. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, was well-known for her feminist views. Mary never knew her mother, as she died a few days after giving birth. Mary Shelley received no formal early education. Instead, she was taught at home by her father. She listened to discussions by literary talents of the time, and read from her father's large library. As a child, she also enjoyed writing and daydreaming. At the age of fifteen she was sent to live in Scotland.



When she was seventeen, Mary eloped to France with noted poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Percy Shelley was, at that time, still married to his first wife, and the father of two small children. Their scandalous act was not approved of in English society.

Mary and Percy Shelley spent the summer of 1816 in Switzerland, and were neighbours of Lord Byron. It was during this time that she began writing *Frankenstein*. They were married in January of 1817, just a few weeks after Shelley's first wife committed suicide. On March 11, 1818, *Frankenstein* was published anonymously. The book received mixed reviews. Mary and Percy Shelley had five children in eight years, although only the last child, Percy Florence Shelley, lived to adulthood.

Also in March, 1818, the couple moved to Italy because of Percy Shelley's poor health. It was during this year that two of the children died. In 1822, Percy Shelley was sailing his boat when he was lost in a storm at sea. His body was found a few days later.

After her husband's death, Mary Shelley and her son returned to England. By that time her second novel, *Valperga*, and a dramatic adaptation of *Frankenstein* were both gaining in popularity. In 1824 she edited *Posthumous Poems*, a collection by Percy Shelley. She continued writing articles and stories for *Westminster Review*, the *Keepsake*, and other periodicals, editing Percy Shelley's works, and writing her own novels. In this way she was able to support herself and her son. Her other works include *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, 1817; *Valperga, or the Life and Adventures of Castruccio*, *Prince of Lucca*, 1823; *The Last Man*, 1826; *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck*, 1830; *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, 1844; and *The Choice: A Poem on Shelley's Death*, edited by H. B. Forman, 1876. Several volumes of her letters were published after her death.

When her son married in 1848, Mary went to live with him and his wife. She lived a quiet life, and died on February 1, 1851.

"Man," I cried, "how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom!"

*Frankenstein*, Volume 3, Chapter VI.